

BOTANICAL ERRORS OF SOME WELL-KNOWN WRITERS

BY JEAN BROADHURST

One of our best-known weekly publications recently printed a *vers libre* effusion on sugar in which Amy Lowell confused the coarse, whitish, turnip-like root commercially termed the sugar beet with the red beet so well known as a table vegetable. She wrote (in part) as follows (*Independent*, 29 December):

Wide plains
 With little red balls hidden under them,
 Beets like a hidden pavement underneath the plains,
 A Roman floor forsooth!
 Do mosaics have any colors to equal these?
 Red as the eyes of cats in firelight,
 As carbuncles under a lemon moon,
 As the sun swirling out of a foggy sky,
 Round as apples,
 Footed as tops,
 You spin yourself deep into the earth
 And swell and fatten
 Sugar in a crimson coat,

 There are still the blood-skinned beets,
 Waiting to be crushed, pulped, and eaten,
 Thunder sugar—blood sugar.

These mistakes are, perhaps, a little more amusing than those commonly made by well-known authors; but it is unfortunately true that our prose and poetry contain many similar errors.

The commonest error is describing as blooming together flowers that bloom weeks or even months apart! If the color scheme suits the author, that is sufficient; why be hampered by truth—or limited by the seasons? And so we read of April violets amid the July lilies and the August goldenrod! In the same well-known "nature novel" by Gene Stratton Porter common market mushrooms are found in profitable abundance before the leaves appear on the trees! Even Jean Ingelow is jubilant over a riot of (March-April) daffodils and (June-July) buttercups!

Then there are several writers who find "beauty unadorned"

unsatisfying. Christmas trees growing on the hillside make no appeal in their fresh clean greenness, but must be described as naturally becaudled; an impossibility, as the balsam fir—the only one of the Eastern evergreens with erect cones that look at all like candles—never retains whole cones through the winter, the cones dropping off, scale by scale, long before Christmas. Our other Eastern cone-bearing trees have *hanging* cones; the most imaginative of our writers could not call them candles.

If ornamental plants have their associated errors, economic ones have their "ten thousands." Hay on its way to the barn is never "foaming golden yellow." No farmer would even cut hay so full of foreign plants that it appeared yellow; still less would he dry, rake, and haul it. One of our best collections of short stories by Mary Wilkins, a New England woman farming under difficulties, who, when a weak-minded relative ambles in with a posy of potato blossoms, breaks down in tears, because he has lessened their potato crop.

What such writers say, to quote Matthew Arnold, "is eloquent, is well—but 'tis not true." It may be partly the fault of the readers. We are not critical enough. We laud to the skies an occasional author who "knows Nature like a book," and cite approvingly such passages as "black-budded ash" and "shimmering beech," although they are details simple enough to be included in the nature study outlines of the lower grades. In these days of illustrated "how to know" books there is little excuse for such botanical and agricultural errors.

Such mistakes are rarely mentioned or corrected in print. In the case of the sugar beet, however, there were evidently many protests, for the magazine later published several objections to the rôle assigned the red beet. Two or three of the criticisms parodied the "free verse" of the original, indicating, probably, that the form of the beet sugar poem irritated many of the readers into writing. We have so long thought of poetry as a beautiful form for something worth saying that it is hard to accept much of the new poetry. We *could* stand lack of rhyme, or even the lack of rhythm, but we can't stand it when they have nothing to say. And if the thing itself isn't worth saying,

why say it at all, unless it can be well said? Matthew Arnold little thought the time would ever come when *poets* would pride themselves that what they say is *not* eloquent, *not* well, and *not* true.

When Bret Harte rhymed about Rose, he never told her surname, admitting the

Last name tolerable
Only in prose.

Does "Leered 'neath his eyes' ophthalmic eaves"* sound or feel like poetry? The "new poetry" is full of similar offences—bloody chunks of raw meat served up on the table where we were wont to find the food of the gods! Still more annoying are the pages of "fiddling" details, most of them too petty to be a necessary part of the picture presented. Walking from the street gate to the doorstep becomes a Sabbath-day's journey as it is described by Frost, a well-known representative of the "new poetry."

How does a mere botanist dare to object? They are writing for the people—these are democratic days and not one of them would claim to be only—or solely—"a poet's poet"—or the equivalent in prose. Anyhow, they started it—mixing things up until even hemlock trees must think they really *are* responsible for the death of Socrates, and the lower vegetables—beets and potatoes and "sich"—well, they must be "befuddled quite." If the literary lights don't like our objections, they have two courses open to them: to stop the education of the masses and so eliminate our criticism, or keep out of our garden.

REVIEWS

Forests of Worcester County, Massachusetts†

This seems to be the first of a series of county forest reports made for the Massachusetts State Forester, but like other recent publications emanating from that office, it has no series name or number, so that it must be treated by librarians and

* John Masfield.

† Cook, H. O. The forests of Worcester County. The results of a forest survey of the fifty-nine towns in the county and a study of their lumber industry. 88 pp., 7 unnumbered half-tone plates. Boston, 1917.